

# Until relations between citizens and states improve in individual nations, it is unlikely that we will see a decline in Euroscepticism

by Blog Admin

*With each passing month of crisis, the transnational solidarity on which the European project depends looks ever more unstable. Domonkos Sik uses Hungary as a case study to argue that attitudes towards the European Union are shaped by the degree of trust which characterises relations between citizens and the state at a national level.*



It increasingly seems as if the prolonged economic crisis is slowly but surely generating an identity crisis in Europe. The more that Europe's leaders articulate solutions to the crisis, the more solidarity among Europeans decreases: a tendency which is even stronger in Europe's transnational context. Of course, crises do not only have negative consequences. As they are also the beginning of any renewal, they hold the potential for emancipatory change. Therefore the current question is whether this European identity crisis will result in the weakening of the union, or in the finding of a new, more inclusive collective identity.

The most important areas where the outcome of this dilemma will be decided are those national discourses where the reason for the existence of the EU is questioned. As the fate of the EU fundamentally depends on the willingness of member states to give up a part of their sovereignty in exchange for economic, political, security and moral benefits, those processes where this willingness is renewed or changed are crucial. These processes are fundamentally embedded into local citizen-state relations, which ground the willingness to place trust in any kind of authority.

That is the point where collective memory comes into the picture. In those countries where historical experiences have ensured a trusting relationship between citizen and state, trusting the EU is framed in a completely different manner than in those countries where the citizens tend to be distrustful of their own state. In the former cases the willingness to partially give up state sovereignty to the EU depends on the estimated effectiveness and trustworthiness of the EU-bureaucracy in comparison to the national state. However in the latter case, no such comparison is applied. Actually in that case those basic experiences of a trustworthy state are missing, which could ground trust in an even more complex and distant meta-state such as the EU. In this sense the real problem in these countries is not Euroscepticism, but state-scepticism.



Post-socialist Hungary certainly belongs to this latter group. During the 50 years of state socialism an alienated and paternalistic political culture emerged, which resulted in a mutually hostile and suspicious relation between citizens and state. Of course the transition provided an exceptional chance to overcome these destructive and unconscious habits. However as research shows, even in the case of the youngest of those who are deemed to be adults politically, these habits still persist.

According to a representative survey in 2011, almost 50 per cent of high school students answered “1” and 30 per cent answered “2” to the question, “Personally how much do you trust politicians on a scale, where 1 means not at all and 5 means absolutely?” This means that approximately 80 per cent of the younger generation, which has been socialised solely in the post-transition period, are still [highly suspicious towards politicians](#).

Questions concerning the EU are embedded within this context. While the general attitude towards the EU is ignorance (70 per cent of high school students answered that joining the EU did not affect their life at all), this could easily transform into suspicion. Although analysis of the data is ongoing, from our experience of fieldwork from the [MYPLACE project](#) it seems that young people do not have any personal experiences of the EU as such. Thus their concepts are derived from their impressions of the local political field.

This means that until relations between citizen and state improve at the local level, attitudes towards the EU will also tend towards negativity. It is important to note that this constellation is burdened with a special difficulty. As Euroscepticism is rooted in state-scepticism, fighting the former requires strengthening the latter. However this results in a paradox, as the strengthening of the nation state implies the distancing from other state-like entities such as the EU.

In the present situation, when the future identity of the EU is at stake, such a trap is particularly dangerous, as it could easily lead to the strengthening of populist voices, providing oversimplified solutions, which, above and beyond the problem of Euroscepticism, constitute a worrying tendency.

*This article first appeared at the [LSE British Politics and Policy blog](#).*

*This post is part of a collaboration between British Politics and Policy, EUROPP and Ballots & Bullets, which aims to examine the nature of euroscepticism in the UK and abroad from a wide range of perspectives.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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